

Part-time and Continuing Education Debate on 5 July 2018

Summary

On 5 July 2018, the House of Lords is scheduled to debate a motion moved by Baroness Bakewell (Labour) on “part-time and continuing education, and in particular the future of the Open University”.

This short briefing considers some of the issues central to the debate on the decline in levels of part-time study in recent years, particularly in respect of part-time higher education courses in England—including a marked fall in the number of students taking part-time courses at the Open University (OU). Reasons suggested for the decline have ranged from economic explanations, such as the impact of the financial downturn on part-time course enrolments, to policy changes, such as the impact of reforms to the student tuition fee regime in England introduced under the Coalition Government. Other reasons, such as changing learning habits, have also been suggested as contributing to the downward trend. In response, the Government has launched a review of post-18 education in England. A selection of recommended reading is identified at the end of the briefing for further information on this subject.

Introduction: Benefits of Part-time and Continuing Education

The pursuit of post-secondary education, whether in the form of skills development, lifelong learning or continuing education, either full- or part-time, has been noted as bringing a broad range of benefits to both individuals and society at large.¹ For individuals, research has shown a positive correlation between education level and a range of often interlinked advantages, including increased earnings potential, better physical and mental health, and greater general life satisfaction.² For wider society, increased education-participation levels have been linked to higher tax revenues, reduced welfare dependency, generally better public health, and greater social mobility.³ The latter benefit is particularly relevant in debates on the subject of part-time education, as students pursuing this mode of study are more likely to be from ‘non-traditional backgrounds’.⁴

In addition, there has been general agreement about the importance of education and skills development, including part-time study, in addressing current skills shortages in the economy and future economic challenges brought on by changes in demographics, in the nature of work, and in the labour market as a result of technological developments.⁵ However, this agreement has been developing in the context of a marked decline in the number of students formally studying on part-time higher education courses across the UK as a whole in recent years—driven by a particular decline in England. This trend has significantly affected leading providers of post-secondary part-time education, including the OU.

Statistics: Decline in Numbers of Part-time Students

There has been widespread coverage in the press and from higher education commentators of the significant decline in the number of part-time higher education students across the UK as a whole in recent years, driven in particular by a steep fall in England.⁶ The decline has been marked: the total

number of part-time entrants to higher education across the UK has fallen by over 47.5 percent since 2008/09.⁷ In that year, just over 473,000 students enrolled in part-time higher education courses. In 2016/17, the most recent year for which data are available, this had fallen to 248,000.⁸ In England alone, there were 403,000 part-time entrants to higher education courses in 2008/09 and 189,000 in 2016/17—a 53 percent drop.⁹

The decline in the number of part-time entrants to higher education across the UK as a whole since the end of the last decade is attributable to falls in the number of students enrolling in all types of part-time courses. Since 2009/10, there has been a 38 percent fall in those enrolling for undergraduate first degrees (bachelor's degrees); a 14 percent fall in those enrolling for taught postgraduate degrees; and a 12 percent fall in those enrolling for postgraduate research courses across the UK.¹⁰ However, the largest fall was in those enrolling for so-called 'other undergraduate' courses, such as foundation degrees, certificates and diplomas. The number of students enrolling in these types of courses declined by 67 percent across the UK during the 2009/10–2016/17 period.¹¹

The tables below detail both first year and total part-time higher education student enrolments UK-wide by level of study for the period 2012/13 to 2016/17. The figures illustrate the overall decline in total numbers over the most recent five-year period for which data are available.

Table 1: First-year Part-time Higher Education Enrolments in England by Level of Study, 2012/13–2016/17 (with figures for the UK as a whole in brackets)

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Postgraduate: Research	5,590 (6,590)	5,710 (6,705)	5,475 (6,450)	5,370 (6,405)	5,120 (6,145)
Postgraduate: Taught	79,695 (96,300)	81,905 (99,555)	84,065 (101,500)	84,595 (100,715)	90,815 (107,880)
Undergraduate: First Degree	49,985 (62,195)	43,965 (54,130)	36,860 (46,385)	36,830 (47,310)	33,980 (44,590)
Undergraduate: Other	95,760 (137,745)	95,760 (121,245)	77,280 (111,450)	70,495 (101,260)	58,730 (89,390)
Total All Levels	231,030 (302,830)	214,835 (281,635)	203,675 (265,785)	197,290 (255,690)	188,645 (248,000)

Table 2: Total Part-time Higher Education Enrolments UK-wide by Level of Study, 2012/13–2016/17 (with figures for the UK as a whole in brackets)

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Postgraduate: Research	25,040 (29,365)	25,245 (29,555)	24,900 (29,190)	24,185 (28,475)	23,600 (27,895)
Postgraduate: Taught	174,935 (211,535)	168,765 (205,440)	166,005 (203,545)	164,095 (199,375)	167,360 (202,485)
Undergraduate: First Degree	182,720 (216,500)	166,945 (199,610)	152,050 (183,630)	143,255 (175,045)	135,100 (167,670)
Undergraduate: Other	148,825 (201,905)	120,595 (168,720)	109,165 (152,555)	98,075 (137,390)	83,040 (121,775)
Total All Levels	531,525 (659,310)	481,545 (603,325)	452,120 (568,930)	429,610 (540,285)	409,100 (519,825)

(Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, '[Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2016/17—Student Numbers and Characteristics](#)', 11 January 2018).

There was also a decline in the number of students in both England and across the UK as a whole enrolling, and enrolled, on full-time ‘other undergraduate’ courses between 2012/13 and 2016/17, though this is masked in the overall full-time enrolment figures for the UK as a whole due to an overall rise attributable to increases in the numbers of research postgraduate, taught postgraduate and first degree undergraduate enrolments over the same period.¹² The overall rise in full-time enrolments between 2012/13 and 2016/17 in both England and the UK means that the proportion of part-time student enrolments reduced as the share of total enrolments in both areas during this period—from 27.7 to 21.6 percent in England and 28.2 to 22.4 percent across the UK as a whole.¹³

Suggested Causes of the Decline

Economic Factors

The decline in part-time student enrolments at higher education institutions in both England and across the UK as a whole since 2008/09 has been attributed to a number of often interconnected economic and policy reasons. Regarding economic factors, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) released a study in 2014 which suggested that entry to part-time higher education courses appeared to have been affected by a range of macroeconomic realities over the past decade.¹⁴ These included falls in employment following the economic downturn beginning in 2008—particularly in the public sector, given a noted correlation between public sector employment and part-time higher education study—and a slow recovery in real earnings that may have made it more difficult for part-time students to finance their studies.¹⁵ The report also noted that part-time study appears to be procyclical—increasing in good economic times and reducing during and after a recession.¹⁶ In addition, and as a result of the downturn, the report noted that the number of undergraduate part-time entrants to with direct financial backing from their employers had fallen by almost half in 2012/13 compared with the previous year, from 40,000 to 23,000. A fall in the support available from employers to part-time postgraduate students was also recorded between 2010/11 and 2012/13. The HEFCE report attributed this latter fall to a large drop in the number of entrants to education-related subjects.¹⁷

It has also been suggested, by Claire Callender, Professor of Higher Education Policy at Birkbeck, University of London, and Chair of Higher Education Studies at the UCL Institute of Education, that would-be part-time students are reluctant to pay the higher tuition fees for part-time higher education courses in place in England since 2012, or to take out a loan to pay for such fees, while the return on such an investment remained “uncertain”.¹⁸ This argument was made in the context that part-time students are more likely to be older and have “numerous family and financial responsibilities” than full-time students. These commitments, such as children and mortgages, Professor Callender argued, would for many people “take priority over discretionary and non-essential spending, including spending on part-time study, especially in times of economic flux and uncertainty”.¹⁹

Government Policy in England

Government funding to higher education institutions for qualifications that were equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification already held by an applicant—so-called ‘equivalent or lower qualifications’—was removed in 2008/09. This has been identified as a potentially contributory element in the decline in the number of part-time higher education students since 2008.²⁰

In addition, a wide range of bodies have argued that the decline in part-time higher education student enrolments can be largely attributed to policy changes that led to an increase in the tuition fees charged by higher education providers. For example, the Sutton Trust, a foundation that works to improve social mobility in the UK, published a report earlier this year which argued that reforms to student funding,

including the abolition of means-tested grants and the introduction of fee loans in England, coupled with significant fee increases for part-time courses from 2012 onwards, “significantly exacerbated” an existing downward trend in the number of students enrolling in part-time courses.²¹ (An overview of the current fee regime for part-time undergraduate students in England can be found in the accompanying House of Commons Library Briefing included as a key document). The House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee has also commented on this issue. The Committee published a report on the economics of post-school education earlier this month, and identified the raising of tuition fees for part-time courses in 2012 as one of the policy factors behind the decline in part-time student numbers:

The decline in part-time learning in higher education is a result of restrictions around accessing loans, for students who already have a degree, the raising of tuition fees in 2012 and the lack of maintenance support for part-time students (which will be available from 2018/19). Similar funding restrictions have also led to a decline in part-time study in further education.²²

Other Causes

Other factors have been suggested as contributing to the decline in part-time higher education student numbers. These include: a general aversion to debt among older students, who are more likely to study part-time; a decline in levels of part-time study for self-improvement purposes or leisure, suggested by the reduction in the number of entrants for ‘combined study’ courses; and a rise in unrecorded learning opportunities, including unaccredited courses at universities, courses delivered by ‘alternative providers’, and massive open online courses (MOOCs)—one of which, FutureLearn, was launched by the OU.²³

Impact of the Decline on Providers: Open University

The OU’s size and the composition of its student body makes it a significant actor in debates on the subject of part-time and continuing education. Established in 1969, the OU specialises in flexible distance learning. People study with the OU for a range of reasons, for example to gain a formal qualification; update skills; assist in the advance of or a change in their career; or to keep mentally active.²⁴

The OU has a diverse student body when compared with other, more traditional, higher education institutions. It taught 38 percent of part-time undergraduates in the UK in 2015/16 and a majority of its new undergraduate students were aged over 25 in that year.²⁵ More recently, the OU has stated that just over three quarters (76 percent) of directly-registered OU students in 2016/17 worked full or part-time during their studies—so called ‘learners and earners’. In addition, 55 percent of its students in England in the same period came from a disadvantaged background, adding weight to the OU’s claim to be the UK’s “largest social mobiliser”.²⁶ Furthermore, 23,630 of the OU’s students in 2016/17 had at least one disability, making it the largest provider of higher education for disabled students in England last year.²⁷

In terms of size, the OU is the largest university by student number in Europe. It had a total of 173,927 registered students in 2016/17.²⁸ It was also, by extension, the largest university by student number in the UK in the same year, with 122,326 students registered in the UK’s four constituent nations—England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—and the Republic of Ireland.²⁹ However, these figures represent a significant reduction in the number of OU students when compared with the beginning of the decade. In 2010/11, the OU had a total of 250,332 registered students, 199,328 of whom were registered in either the UK or the Republic of Ireland.³⁰ In particular, it has been noted that the number of part-time undergraduate entrants at the OU fell by 63 percent between 2010 and 2015.³¹ The reduction in numbers has been linked with the fact that, between 2011 and 2012, the OU increased its

fees for English-domiciled part-time undergraduate students on average from £1,400 to £5,000 per full-time equivalent.³²

In its most recent financial statement, the OU indicated that tuition fee income accounted for £261.2 million of its £426.7 million total income for the year ended 31 July 2017.³³ At 61.2 percent, the proportion of the OU's income from tuition fees illustrates the change in its main income source—from grant funding to tuition fees—since 2012. As a consequence of this shift, the OU has observed that there is “inevitably some volatility in income from relatively small changes in student numbers”, which had informed the OU's plans to “fundamentally review” its operating model.³⁴ As part of changes in how it operates as part of this process, the OU has undergone a number of significant adjustments, including the closure of a number of regional centres in England.³⁵ On 13 April 2018, Vice-Chancellor Peter Horrocks, who had been in post since May 2015, resigned following a vote of no confidence by academic staff. At the time, it was reported that the OU was projecting an annual deficit of around £20 million.³⁶

Impact on Other Providers

Birkbeck, University of London, is another higher education provider specialising in flexible and part-time education. It has stated that part-time undergraduate enrolments and enrolments to undergraduate certificates halved between 2012/13 and 2016/17.³⁷

There are many other providers, excluding higher education institutions, that provide part-time and continuing education to adults. These include further education colleges and charities such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). This latter body, which describes itself as the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education, supports over 50,000 students through a range of courses. A significant number of these students are from disadvantaged areas.³⁸ However, concerns have been raised, including during debates on adult education in Parliament, that the forthcoming devolution of the adult learning budget in England, to mayoral combined authorities and the Greater London Authority, will have negative consequences for the WEA.³⁹

Response: Government-sponsored Review of Post-18 Education

The Government has expressed concern at the decline in the numbers of students registering for part-time higher education courses since at least 2013.⁴⁰ It has indicated that policy changes, such as permitting part-time students in England to access full-time equivalent maintenance loans from next year and the relaxation of the ‘equivalent or lower qualification’ rules in respect of students wishing to enrol on science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) courses on a part-time basis, have been made in order to encourage lifelong learning.⁴¹ The Government is further considering extending maintenance loan eligibility to students studying distance learning courses part-time from 2019/20, subject to the “development of a robust control regime”.⁴²

In addition, and partly in recognition of the issue of declining part-time student enrolments, in February 2018 Prime Minister Theresa May launched a review of post-18 education in England. It was announced that this review would be led by a panel chaired by Philip Augar, a former non-executive board member at the Department for Education.⁴³ The review's terms of reference stated that it should focus on how the Government can “encourage learning that is more flexible (for example, part-time, distance learning and commuter study options)” and “complement ongoing Government work to support people to study at different times in their lives”.⁴⁴ The review ran a consultation between 21 March and 2 May 2018, during which time a large number of part-time education stakeholders submitted evidence.⁴⁵ It is

expected that the review panel will publish its report at an interim stage, before the Government concludes the overall review in early 2019.⁴⁶

Other Responses

In response to the Sutton Trust report on the decline in part-time student numbers, the Labour Party stated that, if it was in government, it would set up a standing commission on lifelong learning, as part of a new National Education Service. It would also “scrap tuition fees” in England, to “ensure everyone has both the opportunity and support to learn, retrain and reskill at every stage of their lives”.⁴⁷

Speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in a recent debate on lifelong learning in the House of Lords, Baroness Garden of Frognal, the Liberal Democrats’ Lords spokesperson on higher and further education and skills, suggested that the Government should consider “personal loan accounts, individual learning accounts with contributions from individuals, employers and government” and “increased teaching grants to universities through a part-time premium” as a means to encourage lifelong learning.⁴⁸

In its recent report on post-secondary education, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee made a number of recommendations in respect of part-time education, including advocating for the introduction of a “credit-based system whereby people can learn in a more modular way and at their own pace” as a means to halting the decline of part-time and flexible learning.⁴⁹ The Committee’s recommendations in respect of part-time and flexible learning have been supported by the OU.⁵⁰

Key Documents

- House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, [Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education](#), 11 June 2018, HL Paper 139 of session 2017–19, pp 4–27 and 57–66
- House of Commons Library, [Part-time Undergraduate Students in England](#), 26 February 2018
- Open University, [Fixing the Broken Market in Part-time Study](#), November 2017
- Claire Callender and John Thompson, [The Lost Part-timers: The Decline of Part-time Undergraduate Higher Education in England](#), Sutton Trust, March 2018, pp 1–5

Further Information

Selection of Recent Parliamentary Material

- [Question for Short Debate on ‘University Admissions: Equality’](#), HL *Hansard*, 7 June 2018, cols 1462–78
- [Question on ‘Higher Education: Part-time and Mature Students’](#), HC *Hansard*, 14 May 2018, cols 4–6
- [Debate on ‘Lifelong Learning’](#), HL *Hansard*, 16 April 2018, cols 1042–64
- [Question on ‘Part-time Study’](#), HL *Hansard*, 20 March 2018, cols 181–4
- [Debate on ‘Education and Society’](#), HL *Hansard*, 8 December 2017, cols 1283–366
- House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Open University: Student Numbers’](#), 13 June 2018, 149905; [‘Written Question: Open University: Finance’](#), 15 May 2018, 142765; [‘Written Question: Open University’](#), 27 March 2018, 133990; and [‘Written Question: Open University’](#), 20 December 2017, HL4181

Other Documents

- Department for Education, [Review of Post-18 Education and Funding: Terms of Reference](#), 19 February 2018; and [Call for Evidence](#), 21 March 2018
- House of Commons Library, [Review of Post-18 Education and Funding](#), 27 June 2018
- House of Commons Library, [Higher Education Funding in England](#), 25 June 2018
- Open University, [Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 July 2017](#), 2017
- Government Office for Science, [Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning](#), 27 November 2017
- Nick Hillman (ed), [It's the Finance, Stupid! The Decline of Part-time Higher Education and What to Do About It](#), Higher Education Policy Institute, October 2015
- Higher Education Funding Council for England, [Pressure from All Sides: Economic and Policy Influences on Part-time Higher Education](#), April 2014
- Higher Education Funding Council for England, [Impact of the 2012 Reforms](#), March 2013

¹ For example: Government Office for Science, [Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning](#), 27 November 2017, pp 20–8; and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [The Benefits of Higher Education Participation for Individuals and Society: Key Findings and Reports 'The Quadrants'](#), October 2013.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Angela Harrison, [‘Dramatic Decline’ in Part-time University Students in England](#), BBC News, 14 March 2013.

⁵ For example: House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, [Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education](#), 11 June 2018, HL Paper 139 of session 2017–19, p 58; and Open University, [Fixing the Broken Market in Part-time Study](#), November 2017, p 2.

⁶ For example: Judith Burns, [‘Part-time Student Numbers at New Low’](#), BBC News, 14 January 2016.

⁷ Higher Education Statistics Agency, [‘Higher Education Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom for the Academic Year 2012/13’](#); and [Table 2: First Year Student Enrolments on Higher Education Courses by Level of Study, Mode of Study and Domicile 2008/09 to 2012/13](#), 16 January 2014.

⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency, [‘Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2016/17—Student Numbers and Characteristics’](#), 11 January 2018.

⁹ Higher Education Statistics Agency, [‘Higher Education Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom for the Academic Year 2012/13’](#); and [First Year Student Enrolments on Higher Education Courses by Location of Higher Education Institution, Mode of Study, Domicile and Level of Study 2008/09 to 2012/13](#), 16 January 2014.

¹⁰ House of Commons Library, [Higher Education Student Numbers](#), 7 February 2018, p 12.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Higher Education Statistics Agency, [‘Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2016/17—Student Numbers and Characteristics’](#), 11 January 2018. See interactive table (Figure 3).

¹³ *ibid.* Percentage figures rounded to one decimal place.

¹⁴ Higher Education Funding Council for England, [‘Pressure from All Sides: Economic and Policy Influences on Part-time Higher Education’](#), April 2014.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp 19–20; and Open University, [Fixing the Broken Market in Part-time Study](#), November 2017, p 8.

¹⁶ Higher Education Funding Council for England, [Pressure from All Sides: Economic and Policy Influences on Part-time Higher Education](#), April 2014, p 19.

¹⁷ Higher Education Funding Council for England, [‘Pressure from All Sides: Economic and Policy Influences on Part-time Higher Education’](#), April 2014.

¹⁸ Nick Hillman (ed), [It's the Finance, Stupid! The Decline of Part-time Higher Education and What to Do About It](#), Higher Education Policy Institute, October 2015, p 20.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ House of Commons Library, [Part-time Undergraduate Students in England](#), 26 February 2018, p 17; Higher Education Funding Council for England, [Pressure from All Sides: Economic and Policy Influences on Part-time Higher Education](#), April 2014, p 7; and Open University, [Fixing the Broken Market in Part-time Study](#), November 2017, p 8.

²¹ Claire Callender and John Thompson, [The Lost Part-timers: The Decline of Part-time Undergraduate Higher Education in England](#), Sutton Trust, March 2018, p 3.

²² House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, [Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education](#), 11 June 2018, HL Paper 139 of session 2017–19, p 7.

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- ²³ House of Commons Library, [Part-time Undergraduate Students in England](#), 26 February 2018, pp 17–19; Sutton Trust, [The Lost Part-timers](#), 15 March 2018; and Government Office for Science, [Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning](#), 27 November 2017, p 87.
- ²⁴ Open University, [Facts and Figures](#), accessed 25 June 2018.
- ²⁵ Open University, [Facts and Figures 2015/16](#), 2016, p 1.
- ²⁶ Open University, [Annual Report 2016/17](#), 2017, pp 2 and 7.
- ²⁷ Office for Fair Access, [Open University Access Agreement 2017/18](#), 2017, p 1.
- ²⁸ Open University, [Annual Report 2016/17](#), 2017, p 16.
- ²⁹ *ibid*, p 8.
- ³⁰ Open University, [Facts and Figures 2011/12](#), 2012, p 2.
- ³¹ Sutton Trust, [The Lost Part-timers](#), 15 March 2018.
- ³² Claire Callender and John Thompson, [The Lost Part-timers: The Decline of Part-time Undergraduate Higher Education in England](#), Sutton Trust, March 2018, p 3.
- ³³ Open University, [Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 July 2017](#), 2017, p 8.
- ³⁴ *ibid*, p 2.
- ³⁵ Chris Havergal, [Open University Confirms Closure of Regional Centres](#), *Times Higher Education*, 24 November 2015; and Peter Wilby, [A Visionary to Save the Open University—or the Man Who Will Run it into the Ground?](#), *Guardian*, 9 January 2018.
- ³⁶ BBC News, [Open University Vice-chancellor Peter Horrocks Resigns](#), 13 April 2018; and Peter Horrocks, [Personal LinkedIn Profile](#), accessed 25 June 2018.
- ³⁷ Birkbeck, University of London, [Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 July 2017](#), 2017, p 8.
- ³⁸ Workers' Educational Association, [Homepage](#) and [About Us](#), accessed 25 June 2018; and [How Adult Learning Transforms Lives and Communities: Adult Education Impact Report 2017](#), 2017, p 6.
- ³⁹ [HL Hansard, 16 April 2018, cols 1052–4.](#)
- ⁴⁰ [HL Hansard, 24 July 2013, cols 508–25GC.](#)
- ⁴¹ [HC Hansard, 14 May 2018, cols 4–5.](#)
- ⁴² House of Lords, [Written Question: Open University](#), 20 December 2017, HL4181.
- ⁴³ Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister Launches Major Review of Post-18 Education](#), 19 February 2018.
- ⁴⁴ Department for Education, [Review of Post-18 Education and Funding: Terms of Reference](#), February 2018, p 2.
- ⁴⁵ Department for Education, [Review of Post-18 Education and Funding: Call for Evidence](#), 21 March 2018.
- ⁴⁶ Department for Education, [Review of Post-18 Education and Funding: Terms of Reference](#), February 2018, p 3.
- ⁴⁷ Labour Party, [Gordon Marsden Responds to the Latest Sutton Trust Report on Lost Part-time Students](#), 15 March 2018.
- ⁴⁸ [HL Hansard, 16 April 2018, col 1045](#); and Liberal Democrats, [Sue Garden](#), accessed 26 June 2018.
- ⁴⁹ House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, [Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education](#), 11 June 2018, HL Paper 139 of session 2017–19, p 7.
- ⁵⁰ Open University, [OU Welcomes Parliamentary Report on Problems Facing Students](#), 12 June 2018.

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